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ABSTRACT

For most universities, a serious film program is still far away. One of the reasons that the sudden interest in film expressed by departments other than Speech and Theatre has not led to a solid program of film study is that these departments are sometimes teaching film for the wrong reasons. Futhermore, the professors engaged to teach these new film courses may be enthusiastic and quite knowledgeable, but their professional training and research loyalities lie elsewhere. Finally, many of the departments which are now offering film courses do not really view as significant in itself, but as a way of interesting students in other educational offerings. One possible approach to the teaching of film would be for the Departments of Speech and Theatre to move toward an interdisciplinary film program. Through such a program the Departments of Speech and Theatre could engage other departments in constructing a master plan for film studies, administer a film program, and essentially coordinate all of the activities for film study. A fully developed undergraduate film curriculum of interdisciplinary nature could cross list the courses offered and indicate the departments which would teach the course. Departments of Speech and Theatre can provide the guidance to begin to develop academically respectable film curricula. (WR)

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Film Studies: A Time For Action

In 1946, Max J. Herzberg, writing in the *English Journal*, made a statement which I am sure he never intended to be prophetic. Herzberg said, "It is indeed a disease of education that films are still only a toy in our schools, still only an incidental and not an essential and indispensable procedure."[1] Even though film courses abound in high schools, colleges, and universities throughout the country, film curriculums (with few exceptions) still rest at the fringes of the academic experience. It is often possible for a student to take many film courses, but few of them are coordinated with one another, and even fewer lead to a major or minor concentration in the subject.

There are reasons for this present situation. Colleges and universities are notoriously slow to embrace anything that smacks of "popularity" and "big business," and those terms have certainly described most films until very recently. For a long time, the only forgiveable place in a university curriculum for film courses was the Radio-TV-Film division of the Department of Speech and Theatre. Here, a few courses did spring up almost as an afterthought to radio and television studies, many of them stressing cinematography, but some dealing with more historical and theoretical subjects.[2]

It was possible for a student to take some film courses by means of a Radio-TV- Film major, and in a few universities, it was even possible to earn a doctorate in Radio-TV-Film with a concentration in film. The presence and frequent excellence of these film courses did not lead to a fullfledged film curriculum because university administrations were somewhat reluctant to extend full support to Radio-TV-Film programs. These curriculums were viewed with considerable suspicion by much of the academic community for their supposed "trade school" orientation. Therefore, whatever film courses they contained were also looked down upon. Although the study of the mass media has finally been granted grudging acceptance, many academicians still have the lurking suspicion that Radio-TV-Film people are really interested only in pushing buttons and twirling knobs.

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It would seem that the way to develop a serious film studies curriculum would be for more established areas such as English or Art to begin teaching motion picture courses. Recently, these departments (and several others) have indeed begun to offer a variety of film courses, but their enthusiasm for film has generated little more than publicity. For most universities, a serious film program is still far away.

One of the reasons why the sudden interest in film expressed by departments other than Speech and Theatre has not led to a solid program of film study is that these departments are sometimes teaching film for the wrong purposes. English departments, for example, are presently faced with serious drops in enrollments. Students are clamoring for courses that deal with their interests, and obviously one of their interests is film. To attract more students, English departments are offering film courses. Such a pragmatic reason for adopting film reflects far more interest in head count than in the subject.

Furthermore, the professors engaged to teach these new film courses may be extremely enthusiastic and sometimes quite knowledgeable, but often their professional training and research loyalties lie elsewhere. This means that no matter how vigorously they might wish to pursue film studies, they cannot freely do so without running into conflict with their departments and their own scholastic backgrounds. A man trained in Renaissance poetry, no matter how qualified he might be in film, would almost be admitting professional incompetence if he were suddenly to express a strong interest in teaching film exclusively.

Finally, many of the departments which are now offering film courses do not really view film as significant in itself, but see it rather as a way of interesting students in the more serious business at hand, i.e. the study of literature, art, history, or whatever. Often professors in these departments take the view that film *itself* is not worth studying at all. They see it only as a way of illustrating literary principles or examining mores of the past. The net result of this "pop" proliferation of film courses is that many departments appear to have made a commitment to film when they really have not. The serious film student might find many film courses available, but few of which would lead to a legitimate major or minor in the field.

Some might well argue that the present lack of film curriculums at the university level merely indicates that motion pictures are not worthy of careful study. I suspect, however, that few professional scholars today could defend such a position. Motion pictures do, after all, represent one of the most important art forms of our century. They have had an immeasurable effect on our tastes and behavior patterns. They are a major social and industrial force in our country, and furthermore, they do have a

content just as surely as novels and symphonies have content. When majors, minors, and advanced degrees are being offered in almost everything else, it is difficult to see why film is not included.

Many people *want* serious film programs in colleges, universities, and high schools, but no one seems to know quite what to do about it. One of the obvious problems is determining which department should be the logical spokesman for such a program. English departments argue persuasively that they should take over film studies because their discipline embraces everything that relates to the written or spoken word (which includes most subjects), and Speech departments defend their right to teach film on the basis of their longstanding involvement in mass media studies. Each department thinks of itself as the only one qualified to teach film. In the midst of all this academic backbiting, the student is cheated and the development of a solid film curriculum becomes a future project.

Perhaps no single department can claim the exclusive right to teach a subject which impinges on so many disciplines. Literary scholars can contribute much to our understanding of film as can musicians, artists, historians, economists, journalists, and broadcasters. Many departments in universities could launch film programs leading to undergraduate majors and minors or even advanced degrees, but I would submit that only one academic department – Speech and Theatre – is in a position to do so at this time.

Departments of Speech and Theatre have several advantages, not enjoyed by other departments, which grant them the power to develop film programs. Departments of Speech and Theatre have been teaching film, for a very long time, through their broadcasting curriculums.[3] They do not have to justify an involvement with film while departments whose academic commitments have been in other areas, must justify their involvement! Departments of Speech and Theatre have attracted most of the qualified film teachers (qualified in the academic sense with courses of study and degrees in film). These individuals do not have to rationalize their interest in film. They can happily study and teach film without feeling terribly uncomfortable. Also, these film instructors, located in Departments of Speech and Theatre, have a working knowledge of film based on professional experience in cinematography or television which often exceeds that gained by the wellread enthusiast of film who teaches in another academic area. Finally, Departments of Speech and Theatre are relatively free, for the moment, of many of the kinds of pressures which have motivated other departments to adopt film courses. The study of broadcasting and related subjects has never been more popular, and other Speech and Theatre areas are also enjoying a student population boom. Therefore, film programs could be launched for more serious scholarly reasons than the search for warm bodies.

I suppose that it would be easy for Departments of Speech and Theatre to take advantage of the present situation and try to gain exclusive right to all film instruction. To do so, however, would be a mistake. As I have indicated, other departments also have something to offer. A far more preferable approach, for Departments of Speech and Theatre, would be to move toward an interdisciplinary film program.

I would recommend the following steps toward developing such a program:

1. The Department of Speech and Theatre should examine its own present film offerings. These might well consist of a solid nucleus of film courses which could become the cornerstone for a more fully developed film program It should consider which courses in film might justifiably be added within the department. These could consist of advanced cinematography, film aesthetics, script writing, acting, lighting, costuming, and film for television use.

2. The Department of Speech and Theatre should initiate a campus-wide study of film courses being offered by all departments to determine if there exists unnecessary overlapping and duplication.

3. The Department of Speech and Theatre should attempt to engage other interested departments in constructing a master plan for film studies, one which would permit all film courses to be cross listed among the departments offering them, and which would enable undergraduate students to take a major or minor in motion pictures.

4. The Department of Speech and Theatre should establish a committee, carefully balanced departmentally in numbers, to administer the problems and conflicts which would inevitably arise in such an interdisciplinary program.

5. The Department of Speech and Theatre should launch frequent seminars and workshops in film which would involve all film instructors on campus.

A fully developed undergraduate film curriculum of such an interdisciplinary nature might look something like this: (All courses would be cross listed. The course title is followed by the departments which might teach it.)

Introduction to Film History (English/Speech)
Introduction to Cinematography (Art/Speech)
Advanced Film History (English/Speech)

Advanced Cinematography (Art/Speech)
Film Aesthetics (English/Speech)
The Novel into Film (English)
Film for Television (Speech/Journalism)
Writing for Film (English/Speech)
Idea, Form, and Medium (English/Speech)
Motion Picture Graphics (Art)
Film in the Classroom (Education)
Acting for Film (Speech)
Lighting and Costuming for Film (Speech)
Film Criticism (English/Speech/Journalism)
Research Methods (English/Speech/Journalism)

The administrative problems arising from such a program would be many. A central question would be student accessibility. Would it be open to majors and minors in the various departments sharing in the teaching, or should it attract only those interested in an exclusive film major or minor? Conceivably, the curriculum could be so arranged that a major or minor in any one of the participating departments could take selected film courses to round out his degree program with related film subjects, while another might, if he wished, major or minor strictly in film with the degree being granted through whichever department he registered.

Any such program would be expensive, especially those courses involving purchases of equipment. These costs could be shared by all departments involved in the program on an equal basis, or the departments could pay only for those courses which they are teaching. Perhaps a separate university fund could be set up exclusively for the interdisciplinary film program.

The existence of problems, however, shoudl not discourage Departments of Speech and Theatre from initiating such a film program. The benefits to faculty and students would be great. Students would be able to obtain the quality of education in film that they want and faculty members could share in the exciting development of a new field with colleagues from other departments.

I fear that if Departments of Speech and Theatre do not move vigorously ahead in the area of film studies, they will find themselves excluded from such programs developed by other departments. These programs will inevitably suffer from the lack of professional guidance that Departments of Speech and Theatre can provide. The time has come for someone to begin talking seriously about film, and for someone to come up with exciting and academically respectable curriculums in that field. If such action is not taken soon, film will remain where it always has been –

an interesting, amusing, "toy" – an appendage to other more established academic curriculums in the university.

References

[1]XXXV (February, 1946), 83.

[2]For many years, the Department of Radio-Television-Motion Pictures at the University of North Carolina has offered a course entitled *Idea, Form,* and *Medium.* It involves comparisons of stories and scripts as they are presented via different media such as stage, screen, radio and television.

[3]The Department of Speech at the University of Michigan, for example, has offered film courses for at least fifteen years.